

Enter the dragons

KIWANIANS HELP KIDS AND COPS BOND THROUGH AN ANCIENT CHINESE SPORT.

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The teamwork needed to propel a dragon boat inspired Andrea Eliscu. “I thought, ‘I wonder what would happen if I put inner-city kids and police officers in a boat?’”

Andrea Eliscu calls them the “invisible kids”: inner-city youth who strive academically but receive neither praise (which is reserved for athletic prowess) nor intervention (which is directed toward troubled behavior). “They tend to get overlooked,” says Eliscu, who is based in Orlando, Florida. “And the gangs and the drug dealers recognize that this kid is a little bit lost.”

Thanks to Eliscu and the Kiwanis Club of Orlando, dozens of these youth now flourish through Dueling Dragons, a dragon boat program that builds trust and teamwork. In the sport of dragon boating, which originated in China some 2,700 years ago, participants climb into long, narrow vessels. A steersman and a drummer lead 20 paddlers, who must work together to swiftly race across a body of water.

“The paddlers give up of themselves,” Eliscu summarizes,

“to become one in the boat.”

When Eliscu launched the effort in 2011, she was concerned about the increasing tensions and conflicts occurring between law enforcement officers and inner-city residents across the United States. Dragon boating, she believed, could help these diverse groups bond. The Orlando Police Department agreed, and the first team of 10 officers and 10 youths was formed.

Not only did the team take to the sport, it won a gold medal in the first competition it entered. When Orlando Kiwanians learned about the program, they wanted to be involved.

“What they’re doing for those kids, it truly transforms their lives,”





“When we tell them all the possibilities that they can have, they’re really enthused about their own future,” says Marty McCain, a retired police officer and Dueling Dragons member.



“One student said, ‘Without Dueling Dragons and the support of Kiwanis, I could not have realized my dreams,’” recalls Tom Porter, secretary of the Orlando Kiwanis Club.

SPOTLIGHT ON CLUBS



The Dragons team urges all Kiwanis clubs to consider a similar program. "You've got inner-city kids everywhere," says Eliscu, "and you've got dragon boats everywhere."



says Tom Porter, the club's secretary.

The Kiwanians donated a 10-person practice boat, provide cookouts for team members and offer scholarships to students. In 2017, the club gave all proceeds from its annual corn-hole fundraiser—nearly US\$12,000—to Dueling Dragons in honor of a fallen OPD officer who had been a team member.

Today, the program has been taken into the fold of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Florida, which is adding two new teams and including members of the Orlando Fire Department in the mix. Marty McCain, a Dueling Dragons participant and retired OPD officer, is the director of dragon boat programming.

"All these kids see is police coming in (to their neighborhoods) and arresting people," he says. "Over the years, these kids who have been in our program realize,



'OK, these aren't bad people.' Before that, they were afraid to talk to them. ... And the police have learned that not all the kids in the hood are criminals. It's worked both ways."

Adds OPD Chief John Mina, "Dragon boating requires teamwork, trust, leadership, perseverance and dedication to succeed. In the dragon boat, officers and kids are equals and learn to rely on each other. The relationships built as a

result transcend dragon boating and have a positive influence on all involved. We are grateful for the generosity Kiwanis has shown to this very important and life-changing program."

Eliscu has her own words for the Kiwanians.

"I call them the earth angels. They are absolutely the most giving, whether it's in person or financially. They have brought the word 'Kiwanis' to life."

MAKE A SPLASH

WHEN YOUR MEMBERS FORGE STRONGER BONDS BETWEEN YOUTH AND ADULTS, THEY CAN ALSO BUILD A STRONGER CLUB. HERE'S HOW:

- **You create loyal advocates.** Andrea Eliscu, founder of Dueling Dragons in Orlando, Florida, rewards the Orlando Kiwanis Club's generosity by increasing its visibility. "We position them every way we can," she says, "as donors who just keep giving."
- **You are seen as leaders.** The foundation arm of the Orlando club sponsored the Dueling Dragons documentary, used to inspire cities throughout the United States to replicate the program. That exposure spotlights the club's forerunner role.
- **You spread the word about your club.** Tom Porter, Orlando

Kiwanis Club secretary, heard a surprising comment when discussing Dueling Dragons with longtime Kiwanians. "They said we've gotten more publicity from that than they had seen in the 30 or 40 years they've been in the club."

- **You attract potential new members.** At the 2017 Dueling Dragons corn-hole tournament fundraiser, Orlando Kiwanians passed out cards with meeting information and invited guests to attend. "We had several people say they were interested in coming to check us out," Porter says.